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C O N F I D E N T I A L ROME 005473

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#) [SY](#) [IT](#) [UN](#)

SUBJECT: ITALY: SYRIA SEEKS HIGHER LEVEL DIALOGUE WITH
US/RENEWED RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL

REF: ROME 05363

Classified By: POL M/C COUNTRYMAN FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

1. (C) Summary: During recent closed talks with the Italian MFA, Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister Walid Muallem expressed a desire to improve US-Syrian relations by developing a higher level dialogue on a more equal footing. Muallem said that a settlement with Israel is the best strategic option for Syria. Hezbollah could not be destroyed, but Syria was doing its best to control the organization and felt it could be rendered insignificant if a true agreement is reached with Israel. Syria wants to participate in bilateral or multilateral discussions with the US on Iraq. The meeting did not appear to us to reveal anything new, but the Italians believe it may offer the USG an opening to test Syria's willingness to cooperate more effectively in the region. A/S Burns' counterpart, Amb. Ricardo Sessa, will ask for the USG view of the Syrian points when he meets Burns in Rome December 9. End Summary

2. (C) Pol M/C met with MFA, Eastern Mediterranean Office Director, Luca Ferrari to follow up on the November 27-28 Syria-Italy meeting held in Rome. The meeting originated from MFA Mediterranean and Middle East Director General, Ricardo Sessa's recent trip to Syria during which the Italians urged the Syrians to do more in relation to Israel and extended an invitation to come to Rome to conduct closed talks to explore meaningful actions. (reftel)

3. (C) The Syrian delegation was headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Walid Muallem and the Italian delegation was headed by U/S Alfredo Luigi Mantica. Ferrari indicated that the Syrian's principal message was to improve US-Syrian relations by developing a higher level dialogue on a more equal footing. Ferrari stated that the meeting was open ("more relaxed and informal than the Syrians have ever been") and that the Syrians declared a desire to work with the US and the international community in order to achieve progress. The meeting focused on the Syrian-Israeli peace process, Hezbollah, and Iraq. Ferrari stated that the Syrians wanted the Italians to deliver messages on the above issues to the US and were hoping to receive a response from the US via the Italians.

Peace Process

4. (C) The Syrians stated that a settlement with Israel is the best strategic option for Syria. They expressed a willingness to restart negotiations with Israel based on the border demarcation of July 4, 1967. Although not presented as a precondition, the Syrians expressed the futility of any talks if there is no agreement on the border. If Israel agrees to the 1967 border, the Syrians said they would be ready to pick up the dialogue based on what was already achieved up to the Shepherdstown agreements. Ferrari also reported that the Syrians expressed their desire to sign agreements and normalize relations with Israel regardless of the continuing issues with Palestine, Iraq and the rest of the region. Muallem expressed concern that PM Sharon would not negotiate with Syria. Ferrari replied that, although this may be true in the Palestinian case, the Syrian front may be one of the only areas where Sharon could demonstrate progress.

Hezbollah

5. (C) The Syrians stated that they did not consider Hezbollah a terrorist organization, but recognized it as a powerful and influential political force. The Italians responded that regardless of what the Syrians say, Hezbollah acts like and is considered a terrorist group by Italy, the US, and many other states. According to Ferrari, the Syrians did not argue the issue and continued the discussion stating that Hezbollah could not be destroyed and that they were doing their best to control the organization. The Syrians went on to state that the group could be rendered insignificant if a true agreement is reached with Israel.

Iraq

6. (C) The Syrians expressed a readiness to participate in bilateral or multilateral discussions with the US on Iraq. The Syrians stated that, although they are willing to pursue a higher level dialogue with the US, they do not feel

obligated to participate. They stressed that they will only be willing to maintain a dialogue with the US and help in Iraq if they receive fair treatment from the US. Ferrari indicated that the Syrians perceive the US as a bully who

threatens and dictates. The Syrians expressed a desire to be part of a comprehensive dialogue on Iraq and feel they can offer many resources and information on dealing with Iraq and terrorism. They do not feel the current dialogue is productive and seek improved strategic talks with the US. Pol M/C stated that bilateral talks do exist. What the Syrians are after is exchanges with higher level officials.

MFA Impressions

17. (C) Ferrari closed stating that he felt Deputy Foreign Minister Muallem had come to Rome with the authority to speak frankly and delivered sincere messages. Ferrari believes the Syrians genuinely want to progress on the peace process with Israel, assist in the war on terrorism, and participate in the reconstruction of Iraq. Deputy Foreign Minister Muallem repeatedly stated that Syria was misunderstood and was not being given the respect and fair treatment it expects in order to participate as a full partner in the region. Ferrari believes the Syrians want to restart strategic talks on more cordial terms and at a higher level with the US and want to protect their own interests through cooperation with the US.

Comment

Although interesting, Ferrari's read-out does not seem to us different from what the Syrians have been saying publicly and privately to us. By using the Italians as the go between the Syrians can maintain a distance while getting their message, genuine or not, delivered to Washington via a more credible channel. The Italians also wish to play a more important role in the region and wish to be viewed as the key negotiator who, if things work out, can take credit for bringing parties together and moving regional peace and stability forward.
SEMBLER

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